

**WELCOMING THE STRANGER**  
An Interview with David Bayat

**Rev. Ron Dunn / David Bayat**

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Over the past several months, we have watched as the refugee crisis continues to increase in its intensity. Conflicts around the globe and, perhaps, most notably, in Syria have created a steady and growing stream of those who have been forced to leave their homes. What they are looking for is not necessarily a better life, but a simply a life. With the likelihood of their own survival diminishing each day, they have done the only thing that anyone of us would have done. They have fled for their lives and for the lives of their families. It has been estimated that there are approximately 50 million people who have been forced from their homes.

This mass exile has, of course, created fear and anxiety around the world—especially in Europe where many countries are faced with the question of how to respond to the throngs of people on their borders who are seeking a safe place of refuge. In our own country, some talk of building a wall along the Mexican border to keep refugees from entering this country illegally. All the while, the fear seems to grow.

In the midst of this tumultuous and fearful time, we, as people of faith are being challenged to respond to this crisis not out of our fear, but out of our faith. For, without question, our faith has some definitive things to say about the absolute importance of “welcoming the stranger.” From the primitive faith of Israel as recorded in the Book of Leviticus to the parabolic teaching of Jesus in our reading from Matthew’s Gospel, the message is unequivocal: We are called to remember that, just as our ancestors were once “strangers in a strange land,” so we are called to welcome those present day “strangers” that we refer to as “refugees.” Jesus even goes so far as to suggest that to welcome the stranger is, in effect, to welcome him.

In addition, our Statue of Liberty serves to remind us that our nation has been built upon this witness of compassion and inclusion. The words of poet Emma Lazarus are familiar to all of us: **“Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to be free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”**

The greatness of America, I believe, can be, in part, traced to the choice that previous generations have made to welcome and include—in spite of the challenges and struggles that would result. This is, you see, in our cultural and national DNA.

Yet, not everyone is convinced. The forces of fear are alive and well and at work. Over the past several months, a growing number of us have been having a conversation about our own response to this crisis and our need to translate our faith into compassionate action. In your bulletin, you will find an insert that describes the Refugee Task Force that has been created among the five United Methodist Churches of our local circuit and our plan to

sponsor a refugee family or individual. Our Church Council recently offered its affirmation of this effort and we are moving forward to implement it.

In light of all of this, I thought that it would be helpful to have a conversation with David Bayat who is a part of our congregation and also, happens to have had the experience of being forced to leave his native Afghanistan for the sake of his own safety and security. I will, however, let David share his story with you in his own words. (Welcome David)

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**INTERVIEW WITH DAVID BAYAT**

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- 1) David, in our conversations, I have learned that you have quite a story to tell. Perhaps you can share a bit of that story with us this morning. What was it that brought you from Afghanistan to Danville?
- 2) What was it like to realize that you wouldn't be returning home? What was the psychological impact of that decision?
- 3) What were your first impressions of North America (Canada and the U.S.)? Did you feel welcomed? Were there any negative experiences?
- 4) You grew up in a Muslim world and suddenly, found yourself in a mostly Christian one. What were the positives and the negatives of that experience? What has it taught you about human nature?
- 5) As you have witnessed the current refugee crisis in Europe and elsewhere, what thoughts do you have about how our world can best respond?
- 6) As with any crisis of this magnitude, it is important to understand the historical context that led to the current state of things. Are there similarities between your situation in Afghanistan and what is taking place now in the Middle East?
- 7) Our United Methodist Circuit of five churches is currently in the process of preparing to sponsor a refugee individual or family. What would, in your opinion, be the most helpful approach to take in this process? What advice or caution would you offer?
- 8) Are there any other thoughts or convictions that you would like to share with us?

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A final postscript that I would like to share is the thought that there is, in the midst of the danger of this current crisis, an opportunity...

We have the opportunity to translate the fundamental principles and convictions of our faith into compassionate action—to not only talk the talk, but to walk the walk.

We have the opportunity to respond to the forces of fear by relying upon the convictions of our faith.

We have the opportunity to live out God's vision of a world in which the borders and boundaries that divide nations from one another are transcended by the power of love and the knowledge that we are all a part of the same family.

In our choice to "welcome the stranger," we have the opportunity to welcome none other than Jesus himself. As he would remind us, "In as much as you have done it to the least of these, you have done it unto me." Amen.